



Feeding the Birds

Like most of the other people I have seen lately, I have had enough of cold weather! During one really cold spell, the one that involved the governor cancelling school throughout Minnesota on account of some fairly obscene wind-

chills, you could say I was all “stoved up”. The better part of that situation is that I spent a few days more-or-less parked by our wood-burning cook stove. The worse part of that situation is that I was home due to a back injury. Ironically, what helped the most in the short-term was applying ice for extended periods of time to the parts that hurt the most, while resting in various agonizing positions. About the only way I could really face the ice treatment was to park myself next to that stove.

My dog found life better next to the stove, too. Our two big dogs are normally eager to join my partner as he heads to work every day in the woods. Lately, though, the older of the dogs is increasingly apt to sneak on past the man and head back to her bed. When she does venture outside, she’s quick to head back in and park herself near the heat, where I guess you could say she is “stoved up”, too.

Temperatures on the Chippewa National Forest, as in much of Minnesota, have been heavily influenced lately by blasts of arctic air, and that is the perfect time to fire up this stove. Originally intended for cooking, I find the stove most useful when the oven door sits ajar (to let out the heat) and you feed short wood into it until the cast iron lids fairly glow with the heat and the coffee pot boils hard. Then it is you might sit down in the easy chair and look out the window at the frigid world that lies beyond.

On one of the coldest of these mornings, I watched the sun rise over the swirls of blowing snow, and was pleasantly distracted by all the activity at my bird feeders. From my spot I could watch the fawn who doesn’t leave even when I holler and knock on the glass, a couple of bold red squirrels that are lucky my cats are tucked away somewhere out of the cold, and a woodpecker that keeps scattering the seeds in search of I really don’t know what. Perhaps it is in cahoots with the fawn. A few pine grosbeaks are beginning to show up, with a whole passel of smaller birds, including nuthatches, chickadees, and American goldfinches. By far, the most numerous were the goldfinches. They made life so interesting; I just have to say Thank Goodness for Goldfinches!

I had been hearing reports of the large numbers of goldfinches people are seeing this year, but I really hadn't seen them myself until this time. If you don't know this bird off hand, in the summer males are a bright yellow with black wings, and they sing the sweetest song. I had a brother-in-law who referred to them as 'fairy' birds, because of the voice. In winter, this bird is more of an olive-yellow. When female goldfinches choose their mate, they prefer the males with the brightest colors.

This little bird breeds later than do most other North American birds, as they wait to nest until later summer when milkweed and thistle and similar plants have made their seeds. The goldfinches build the down into their nests, and use the seeds to feed their young. Goldfinches eat almost exclusively grains.

I got curious about the large number of goldfinches I was seeing, so I did a little reading. Northern populations of goldfinches go southwards in the winter. In cold conditions, goldfinches shiver nearly continuously. Apparently, they can produce heat at nearly five times their normal rate by shivering. Their winter distribution appears to relate to regions where the minimum January temperature is no colder than an average of 0 degrees F. North of this, long spells of sub-freezing temperatures and snow accumulation probably is the natural limit to goldfinch overwintering due to limited food.

Winter flocks are nomadic, with their movements linked to food supply. This species is common at bird feeders. It appears that recent increases in numbers of winter bird feeders has led to more goldfinches overwintering in the northern parts of their range.

Almost as quickly as my goldfinches had appeared, they seemed to disappear again. This happened during one of those extreme cold spells. I contacted some of my friends who know many things about birds, and asked for their thoughts. The DNR non-game biologist had noticed the same thing happening at her feeders. She suggested perhaps it was a lack of competition between these finches and some of the northern finches, allowing the goldfinches to stay longer. She had noticed a lack of redpolls at her feeders, perhaps due to a good cone crop up in Canada keeping the redpolls from moving south. When the extreme cold hit, perhaps that was a trigger for the goldfinches to move south, although who knows how successful that movement would be in such cold weather. A University bird expert suggested the sad idea that the goldfinches may have died due to the cold. It's not a simple task, sorting out what all is going on in the bird world.

In an interesting turn of events, it seems that the logger of my family has been feeding the birds, too. For the past few weeks, he has noticed a little bird following him around in the woods, as he cuts trees blown over by the July 2012 storm. A bold little bird, this Northern Shrike is unafraid of the noise of the logging operation. This shrike is a winter visitor, coming south from their breeding grounds in Alaska and Canada to Minnesota, where food may be more available.

About the size of a robin, this songbird is predatory. In the winter it eats mainly small rodents and songbirds, with insects also being consumed in the summertime. Evidently, the logging operation is turning up food items the shrike is taking advantage of. Shrikes typically sit and wait on an exposed hunting perch. When they see a tasty morsel, they will dive down and fly

fast and low, grabbing their victim with their bill or feet. Shrikes will also catch some birds in flight, chasing after such flocking species such as goldfinches and redpolls. After catching something, the shrike will grab and twist with its bill, and use a sort of teeth in the upper bill to damage the spinal cord and kill the prey.

Shrikes are perhaps best known for their odd behavior after capturing their food. They can carry food items that weigh as much, if not more, than themselves. They wedge their food into v-shaped tree branches, or bring their food to sharp thorns or branches in shrubs and trees (sometimes even barbed wire), where they will impale it and leave it hanging in the sort of “larder” that only a shrike would love.

The logging operation is finishing up on its current cutting block. I am waiting with great curiosity to see if the shrike follows them to the next block, over a mile away.

